



## NICARAGUA: WHERE ONDINE COHANE GETS SPORTY

by ONDINE COHANE  
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Surf the breaks with the bold...Swing the treetops with monkeys... Climb the volcano with hot hands...Walk to the waterfall with butterflies...Dive the reef with green parrot fish. You're in the new Action Central:

I am crawling on my hands and knees up the final slope of Cerro Negro, one of the five active volcanoes of Nicaragua's Cordillera Los Maribios. I can feel in my palms the heat of the black ash and small rocks, cooked by both the sun above and the lava below. This is not the most elegant way to assault a volcano. My guide is in trouble. He's coughing and wheezing as he sprawls on a boulder farther down, sidelined by an asthma attack, and he asks if I want to turn back. Not me, not now. I focus on the crater's edge, thirty feet above. Altitude sits like a heavy weight on my chest, and I crouch to catch my breath.

When I can spare a look, the view is an eyeful: the domes of the four other volcanoes and, below them, gentle undulating farmland, a patchwork of luxuriant fields greened by the rainy season, and herds of livestock wandering the shady paths. León, the former colonial capital of the country, is only a half-hour's drive away. To the west, I can make out the distant blue shimmer of the Pacific. But here on the slopes of Cerro Negro, or Black Hill, the landscape is stark, burned clean of any vegetation. A lone hawk glides over the volcano and the sky turns moody—a perfect moment for a personal revelation, if I had time. Nearer to the crater, there's the stench of sulfur, and then I am peering into the pit. It looks as though its center has been pelted with eggs, the yolks and whites cooking side by side on this huge natural skillet of black rock, wisps of pale smoke rising from the light gray ash.

The volcanoes I have seen elsewhere in the world have always been safely barricaded and surrounded by camera-happy tourists. I have never stood so close to the mouth—nor been completely alone at the edge of the crater. This would become one of my favorite things about Nicaragua: seeing so much of it in my own company, minus the crowds.

My lungs now full of volcanic fumes, I walk around the crater to the other side and discover, worn into the rock, a much easier route back down. It turns out that the guide and I have parked on the wrong side of the volcano and done it the hard way. For some reason, the local government has removed the signs to the easy route. Which reveals another thing to love about Nicaragua: that your venturings here are largely unscripted. You can take the scenic, solitary route if you want—and you might not even realize, or care, that a more well-trodden version exists.

Inevitably, my impressions of Nicaragua are colored by the Sandinista revolution that toppled the Somoza dictatorship in 1979, the devastating civil war that raged throughout the next decade, and of course the Iran-Contra scandal. But the country wasn't always so violent. The normally cantankerous Mark Twain, who visited in 1867, grew effusive in his journals when he described the volcanoes of Nicaragua's Ometepe Island: "What a home one might make among their shady forests, their sunny slopes, their breezy dells, after he had grown weary of the toil, anxiety and unrest of the bustling, driving world." Today, under a democratic president and following three peaceful elections, Nicaragua has stabilized and is gearing up for visitors. Tourism is vital to its economy—the country still ranks second to last in the Western Hemisphere in terms of per capita GDP (only Haiti is poorer). Nevertheless, there has been a thirty-three percent increase in the number of North American and European tourists over the last five years, helped by a new generation of tour operators and adventure outfitters. The reasons are clear: In a country the size of New York State, seventeen percent of the land is earmarked for nature reserves, and you'll find seven percent of the world's biodiversity. The topography is so varied that you can hike, ski, and mountain bike over active volcanoes; stroll through rain forests full of pumas, monkeys, and butterflies; kayak amid a maze of freshwater islands in the region's largest lake; dive a pristine reef that is one of the Caribbean's best-kept secrets; and surf deserted breaks. All of which is why I

bought a new pair of hiking boots, filled a knapsack, and flew down.

The city of Granada, on the northwest shore of Lake Nicaragua, has become the center of the action. The volcanic Mombacho Natural Reserve and Masaya National Park are only a short drive away, and the Pacific beaches are within easy reach. Granada is also the country's colonial showcase and home to many fine churches and museums, as well as arguably its best restaurants and hotels. Social life inevitably centers around the main plaza in front of the cathedral. Exquisite seventeenth-century churches (such as the bright sky-blue San Francisco) and houses with flower-filled courtyards populate the wide boulevards. The entire center has been designated for preservation, and historic buildings recently snapped up to be converted into either hotels or private homes must follow strict architectural guidelines (which left me wondering why the main real estate sales office has been allowed to put up a neon sign).

I sit in Granada's Hotel Colonial, facing the mosaic-tiled swimming pool, which looks deliciously cool on this very hot morning. After a hearty breakfast of gallo pinto (Nicaraguan rice and beans), fried eggs, sweet mango juice, and two cups of the seriously potent locally grown coffee, two young guides, Barcell Almanza and Byron Ortiz, swing by to pick me up. (Barcell's American-accented English, it turns out, comes via Miami, which is where many Nicaraguan families waited out the revolution.) From Granada, they tell me, it's possible to kayak Lake Nicaragua in the morning and, in the afternoon, attempt a rain forest canopy tour: rocketing through the treetops, platform to platform, via steel cables and a harness. We drive just fifteen minutes south along the lake and park next to a dock where our kayaks are waiting. From here we can easily explore a few of the three hundred tiny islands, Las Isletas. Many of them have become compounds for retired Americans and rich Nicaraguans (called ricos). Barcell, who just turned twenty-one, points out the SE VENDE signs in the same breath as he does the rare bird species that have staked out their own territory. Apart from a legion of white herons that keep us company, we are the only living things here, and when we do see the occasional water taxi, I am startled. Barcell worries about the effects of the property boom on the culture and the environment. "We don't want to be Americanized like Costa Rica," he says. And here's the familiar rub: His people crave the jobs and income but not necessarily the outcome.

After kayaking (I get soaked and need new clothes), our next adventure is in the Mombacho cloud forest. Mombacho is as lush as Cerro Negro is barren, covered in wild orchids and furiously growing vines. A slow rain starts to fall as we enter the forest, enshrouded in low-lying cool clouds. After I sign a cheery waiver, taking full responsibility for my own dismemberment or death, I strap myself into a harness for the canopy tour. The getup makes me look like a cross between a parachutist and a coal miner.

I start to climb the first of three ladders up to the thirty-foot-high platforms built into the sides of the ceiba trees, the adrenaline coursing through my legs. As I do, I wonder if the headline, "American tourist killed in tragic quest for treetop thrill," will even make the front page back in Managua. Meanwhile, the nearby howler monkeys call out continuously, no doubt mocking my need for so much equipment. But with a few reassuring words from Byron and a final check of the apparatus, I get in touch with my inner orangutan and leap from the first platform. Once beyond the second platform, I find that I actually enjoy how I accelerate as I fly along the wires. In fact, I am, literally, hooked. The sensation of being suspended far above the ground is thrilling in itself, but the 650-yard route has another reward: a breathtaking view of the surroundings. Parrots, parakeets, chestnut-headed oropendolas, and urracas (black-billed magpies) glide through the pochote trees next to me. Orchids reach in all directions—there are eighty-seven species in this reserve alone. Back in Granada, ravenous and parched, I slouch into a local seafood spot named El Zagan. I devour a whole guapote, the freshwater bass that lives in the neighboring lake and is the restaurant's centerpiece, its delicate sweet flesh stuffed with green peppers and sliced onions. I drain a couple of cold Victorias, the local beer—less than a dollar a bottle—and check my watch. It's only 9:30 in the evening, but I am beat. I stroll through the slumbering plaza, the day's heavy heat replaced by a cool evening breeze, anticipating the deep sleep that is the reward of the truly exhausted.

Out of the midst of the beautiful Lake Nicaragua spring two magnificent pyramids, clad in the softest and richest green, all flecked with shadow and sunshine, whose summits pierce the billowy clouds." So wrote Mark Twain on New Year's Day, 1867, when he traveled to Ometepe, the dramatic island formed by twin volcanoes a few miles off the lake's southern shore. More than a century later, my approach is also by boat, and suddenly Twain's island rises before me, soft and richly green in the golden August light. Its volcanoes, he wrote, "look so isolated from the world and its turmoil—so tranquil, so dreamy, so steeped in slumber and eternal repose." To Nicaraguans, Ometepe is a promised land, the double-domed beauty prophesied in an oracle to the Chorotega and Nahuatl Indians who wandered the country in search of it thousands of years ago. I too am instantly smitten. With its volcanoes, green lowlands, tiny villages, and water views, the island feels

like a jewel box version of Nicaragua. But when I arrive by ferry, the port of Moyogalpa has none of the promised tranquillity. Edwin (another Nicaraguan with an English name) greets me, and we start the drive to the Villa Parasaio, a hotel on the other side of the island. The light begins to fade, and machete-wielding campesinos head home for the night on bicycles and horses and in oxcarts. Piglets, dogs, and droopy-eared cows wander the unpaved road that circles the island. The rice paddy-green fields are dotted with prehistoric-looking trees and upturned roots and volcanic boulders. I half expect to spot a dinosaur here. Edwin and I agree to meet the next morning to climb Concepción, the steeper of the island's two volcanoes and almost a day's hike round-trip.

The following morning, the weather has turned against us. Although the lower-elevation areas remain sunny, the volcanoes have become dark with storm clouds. "You won't be able to see a thing up there," Edwin tells me, "but the cascade on Maderas at San Ramón is absolutely beautiful." So we tackle the other volcano, Maderas.

The San Ramón hiking trail turns uphill, following the stream that courses down from the waterfall. Black butterflies with red-striped wings tipped in yellow float in and out of view, mingling with others that are bright orange and bleached white. White-faced capuchin and howler monkeys crash through the underbrush nearby, and kingfishers' calls echo in the dense, shady jungle. When we arrive—sweaty, ruffled, and somewhat muddy—cool droplets drift out from a 490-foot waterfall, a long cascade that tumbles over a canopy of dangling green moss. After we finish the trail, I feel invigorated and decide to take a long hike without a guide. I amble along the dirt road, with the shores of the lake lapping on one side, passing fields and small villages on the other. The sound of drums leads me to a playground beside a small school: The marching band is practicing, and the musicians perk up at the sight of an audience—me. I watch for a while, then wander around the school. Outside one of the buildings, I come across a bulletin board covered with the children's poetry. One line reads, "*El amor a la naturaleza es una forma permanente del amor de la vida*" ("The love for nature is a permanent form of the love of life").

I am back on the ferry early in the morning, sad to leave Ometepe. Pierre Gédéon, the owner of Nicaragua Adventures, meets me in Rivas, and from there we drive west to the Pacific. Pierre came to Nicaragua five years ago from Chamonix, France, by way of Costa Rica. He had first skied down the hot ash of the Cerro Negro in 2001, and in the last two years he has organized the Ruta de los Volcanes, a sort of gentle Tour de Nicaragua in which bikers of all levels navigate a hundred miles of back roads and six of the country's volcanoes.

San Juan del Sur, a short hop from the Costa Rican border, would be our next base. Once just a sleepy fishing village that catered to the occasional surfer, it's now one of Nicaragua's more touristy spots. But you can still find secluded beaches and coves for sportfishing, surfing, or sunning just fifteen minutes from town.

Boards in tow, we head for Maderas, which has the best surfing beach accessible by car (most of the good breaks are reachable only by boat). Two bleached-blond Americans are getting out of their van as we pull up, several surfers are already in the water, while a few others are sitting around in front of a small bar, beers in hand, staring at the waves as only career surfers can. I swim out into the booming surf and, after a couple of good poundings, consider myself outmatched—these waves are just too big. It is enough to watch the more experienced surfers riding the barrel.

The next day, Pierre and I drive to Morgan's Rock, a new eco-resort near the Costa Rican border. Things might have looked very different here: Before Panama was chosen as the place to cut a canal from the Caribbean to the Pacific, Nicaragua was the rival for the project. Had it gotten the nod, the canal would have sliced through here along the line of the San Juan River.

Morgan's Rock is 4,500 acres of tropical forest, deserted beachfront, and hiking trails. It's also a bastion against the unregulated land boom around San Juan del Sur, a boom fueled by surfers who want a piece of the beach as well as by retirees drawn by Web site enticements. Before the land on which it was built was purchased by a French couple, Clement-Marie Ponçon and his wife, Claire, it had suffered severe deforestation. The Ponçons have since planted 1.7 million trees and repopulated the land with iguanas, monkeys, tree sloths, and rare birds. The eco-resort has only fifteen bungalows and uses recycled wood and solar power.

I go for a long sunset swim off the beach at Morgan's Rock and feel as though the whole Pacific were mine alone. I'm enjoying the fruits of an exemplary exercise in preservation that grants privacy to hedonists while it serves the planet well. This coastline will need more people like the Ponçons.

I had heard about a tiny island some forty-five miles off the eastern, Caribbean shore of Nicaragua, close to the barrier reef that extends down this part of Central America's coastline. Called Little Corn Island, it's a top dive spot on the country's east coast and one of the Caribbean's best-kept secrets. I fly from Managua to Corn Island, and from there travel by boat to Little Corn—a heavy Caribbean swell has the boat pitching, and all of the passengers get a good soaking.

On Little Corn, a man waits in front of the dive shop with a wheelbarrow to take my bags to the Casa Iguana, a hotel with eleven casitas along the water, the whole thing run by solar- and wind-powered generators. A single paved pathway meanders along the beach, past a few restaurants, bars, and a Baptist church. Outside the village, the path becomes a sandy two-mile track that you can use to circumnavigate the whole island, passing hog apple and plantain trees, gnarled mangroves, deserted beaches, and little houses with unruly gardens full of overgrown hibiscus plants and banana trees. That night, following a communal dinner of lobsters and margaritas, I sit on the windswept porch of my casita and watch the distant lightning outlining the shapes of the moving palms.

At the dive shop the next morning, I get taken out for a private lesson. Descending along the anchor line above Stanley Reef, I spy a nurse shark hiding under a rock, waiting for just the right moment to make a meal out of an unsuspecting school of baitfish. Green stoplight parrot fish and four-eyed butterfly fish, a couple of eagle rays, and giant groupers swim past. Because the diving is shallow and the reef undamaged, you can easily spy its secret hiding places and their seemingly endless streams of fish, schooling thick and bright.

Afterward, the dive boat drops me off on a stretch of beach that's deserted except for a little house a few steps away. This is Farm Peace & Love, a restaurant where an Italian woman named Paola Carminiani serves a few diners daily. I had booked in advance by radio, but despite the establishment's name, the owner has no love for me. "You are forty minutes early," she scolds in an Italian accent. "Lunch won't be ready until at least one-thirty." With that she turns abruptly and vanishes into the kitchen. Eventually, she reemerges, a perfect *penne al pomodoro* in hand. Paola pours me a glass of crisp Cantine dei Marchesini before disappearing again. The next time she emerges, she has a *sformato di spinaci* (spinach soufflé), the Gruyère and Parmesan melting into the deep-green leaves. Save for the white sand beach in front of me and the turquoise sea, I could be at a trattoria in Rome. The meal goes on for hours. Even a *panna cotta* arrives, with a kind of fruit I've never seen before that tastes like a cross between a raspberry and a blueberry and is served with sugar and cloves and a shot of espresso. The sheer force of will to acquire the requisite ingredients on an island in the middle of the Caribbean, miles from town, is staggering. A dive trip all my own followed by an Italian feast. Unscripted and surprising. Like Nicaragua. [Go to Places + Prices](#) ▶

## PLACES + PRICES

Tourism is still relatively new to this nation, which means great hotel deals and very cheap meals. The downside is service and amenities that can be spotty, especially in places that get few travelers (Ometepe, for example). Ask about air-conditioning, television, and even hot water before you book. Many roads require four-wheel drive, and signage is rudimentary. But guides and drivers are inexpensive, and most hotels will arrange short-term hiking guides for a nominal sum.

*The country code for Nicaragua is 505. Prices quoted are for the current month, which is high season; activities prices are per person. The U.S. embassy is at Carretera Sur km 4.5 in Barrio Batahola Sur (266-6010; [managua.usembassy.gov](http://managua.usembassy.gov)).*

**Nicaragua Adventures** organizes custom tours for adrenaline junkies, culture hounds, and beach bums. Its Ruta de los Volcanes, an eight-day, \$900 October bike trip, includes skiing the Cerro Negro volcano (883-7161; [www.nica-adventures.com](http://www.nica-adventures.com)).

Thanks to improved connections on **Nature Air**, more people are pairing a Costa Rica trip with a few days in Nicaragua (506-220-3054; [www.natureair.com](http://www.natureair.com)). Eco-friendly **Costa Rica Expeditions** recently launched a 15-day itinerary combining a stay at the new Morgan's Rock in Nicaragua with a few days in Granada (506-222-0333; [www.costaricaexpeditions.com](http://www.costaricaexpeditions.com); \$3,789, with a four-person minimum).

## Managua

Even if you spend only your arrival and departure days in the capital, visit the **Catedral de Santiago**. Its facade and delicate skeleton are haunting reminders of the beautiful architecture once in abundance. Tragically, the city is still recovering from a devastating 1972 earthquake. Street signs are based on the pre-earthquake town plan, which makes navigation difficult.

A big downtown hotel with more amenities, the **Hotel Real InterContinental Metrocentro** looks newly buff after a multi-million-dollar face-lift (278-4545; [www.intercontinental.com](http://www.intercontinental.com); doubles, \$159; w). In contrast, the **Hotel Los Robles** is cozy, with good-sized rooms around a pretty courtyard in a quiet residential neighborhood (267-3008; [www.hotellosrobles.com](http://www.hotellosrobles.com); doubles, \$80). Well located on Texaco Lomas de Guadalupe, the **Hotel Seminole Plaza** has friendly staff and a pool (270-0061; [www.seminoleplaza.com](http://www.seminoleplaza.com); doubles, \$95). Simple, traditional Nicaraguan fare—like *nacatamales* (leaf-wrapped tamales)—is served at **Cocina de Doña Haydée**, which has a dining terrace. It's one block south of Pharaoh's Casino (270-6100; entrées, \$2-\$13). Sample the country's excellent steak at **El Churrasco**. The best of three locations is in Rotonda El Güegüense (266-6661; entrées, \$11-\$25). A short drive out of Managua and open only on Sundays, **Al Di Là** has great views of the capital and an excellent five-course dinner for \$30. Call for directions (291-2210).

### Granada and Ometepe Island

**Mombotour** books kayaking, hiking, canopy tours, and horseback riding day-trips (552-4548; mombotour; \$20-\$35).

Granada's newest hotel, the Nicaraguan-owned **La Gran Francia**, is a successful colonial renovation (552-6000; [www.lagranfrancia.com](http://www.lagranfrancia.com); doubles, \$95). **The Hotel Colonial**'s rooms are more basic; highlights are the little pool and bar (552-7581; [www.nicaragua-vacations.com](http://www.nicaragua-vacations.com); doubles, \$65). Little **La Casona de los Estrada** is secluded on a quiet street near the Church of San Francisco (552-7393; [www.casonalosestrada.com](http://www.casonalosestrada.com); doubles, \$60-\$80).

Nicaraguan sirloin, grilled four ways, is the specialty at **El Zaguán**, across from the cathedral, which also serves delicious guapote, or bass (552-2522; entrées, \$5-\$8). **El Mediterraneo**, east of Parque Colón, has a romantic interior garden and makes a tasty seafood paella (552-6764; entrées, \$8-\$11). The bar **El Club** is the nexus of Granada's social life in the evenings (Calle La Libertad and Av. Barricada).

The quickest way to Ometepe from Granada is by car ferry from San Jorge, which is near the town of Rivas, about an hour's drive from Granada. The boat leaves daily at 10:30 and 2:30 (278-8180; reservations required for cars). The **Villa Paraíso**'s location on Playa Santo Domingo makes it ideal for touring the island, and the food is quite good—get a table on the terrace, facing east across the lake (453-4675; doubles, \$40; entrées, \$6-\$8). Stop in the town of Altagracia to see its pre-Columbian statues and, near Balgue, the petroglyphs.

### León

While most tourists make Granada their base, León has similar colonial attractions: the beautiful **Catedral de la Asunción**, a dozen churches (**La Recolectión** and **El Calvario** are highlights), and the country's top university. León spawned many of the leading figures of the Sandinista movement, so there are also revolutionary sites such as the **Old Social Club**, where Somoza García was assassinated in 1956, and the **Galería de Héroes y Mártires**, a gallery displaying photos of young people who were killed during the revolution.

**El Convento**, with its huge convent garden and covered walkways, feels secluded but is a three-minute stroll from the town center (311-7053; [www.hotelesconvento.com.ni](http://www.hotelesconvento.com.ni); doubles, \$88). People-watch from the tables outside **Restaurante El Sesteo**, directly across from the cathedral (311-5327; entrées, \$8-\$10). In a new location just southwest of the Parque Central, **El Taquezal** serves the best local dishes, such as pork ribs and spicy chicken wings (311-7282; entrées, \$3-\$5).

### Little Corn Island

Way out in the Caribbean, **Casa Iguana** is a quirky 13-cabin eco-hotel with a hippie vibe. It has no phones but the island's only Internet service. There are set nightly meals, such as lobster risotto with peanuts and mango, and delicious hearty breakfasts—from traditional *gallo pinto* and egg dishes to French toast and pancakes ([www.casaiguana.net](http://www.casaiguana.net); doubles, \$25-\$80; entrées, \$9-\$14). The owners also run the local dive shop, so you can make arrangements through them or at the storefront in town ([www.divelittlecorn.com](http://www.divelittlecorn.com); dives from \$58).

Too bad **Farm Peace & Love** is a 30-minute hike north of town—it's excellent (no phone; three-course set menu, \$12). So is lunch at **Havana Libre**, on the main drag. The Cuban chef cooks lobster, shrimp, chicken, and beef in a sweet sauce of tomatoes and onions. Be sure to order a post-meal *café con leche* (no phone; entrées, \$6-\$10).

### San Juan del Sur

Getting to the best Pacific surfing breaks requires a boat, and Dale Dagger organizes everything from a day-trip for \$170 to an all-inclusive eight-day tour for \$860 (458-2429; [www.nicasurf.com](http://www.nicasurf.com)). The new **Piedras y Olas** has beautiful hilltop views, big comfortable rooms, a good restaurant, and an infinity pool (458-2110; [www.piedrasyolas.com](http://www.piedrasyolas.com); doubles, \$100-\$130). Twenty minutes from town, the luxurious **Morgan's Rock Hacienda & Ecolodge** has many activities on a large eco-reserve, from mountain biking to reforestation programs in which you plant your own tree (270-6824; [www.morgansrock.com](http://www.morgansrock.com); doubles, \$358, all-inclusive).

**Ricardo's Bar** is open all day for meals, but the action really gets going after dinner, when most of the town congregates here for drinks (458-2502; entrées, \$7-\$11). The Italian owners of **O Sole Mio** serve food from the old country, and particularly good wood-oven pizzas (458-2101; entrées, \$5-\$8). Lunch on fresh seafood at **La Puesta del Sol**, on El Coco Beach (892-0124; entrées, \$7-\$19).

### Reading

The **Moon Handbook** *Nicaragua* is the most comprehensive (\$18), while the **Rough Guide** *Central America* has a good condensed section on the country (\$20). Mark Twain writes about 19th-century Nicaragua in *Travels with Mr. Brown*, much of which will seem familiar to today's travelers (out-of-print). Salman Rushdie's *Jaguar Smile: A Nicaraguan Journey* provides a quick, illuminating account of the revolution (Picador, \$13), while one of the country's most famous poets, Gioconda Belli, recounts her own involvement with the Sandinistas—romantic and otherwise—in *The Country Under My Skin: A Memoir of Love and War* (Knopf, \$25).